



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 Medical Centers
Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2017 – SWMO – 02



<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks Customer Satisfaction Program

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the high standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center – John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans reported positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persisted among veterans with the customer service they received at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a “secret shopper” program for veterans—formally named the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans’ positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans’ organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the second Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Southwest Missouri facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2017

To the Director of the Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Southwest Missouri region. After reviewing the responses from this survey, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the Southwest Missouri region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks' ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I meant it then, and I mean it now. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum going that we have established over the last few years with the robust participation among our veterans. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support of the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in Southwest Missouri.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Claire McCaskill". The signature is stylized with a large, circular initial "C" and a long, sweeping underline.

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

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Would you like your voice heard?

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the Southwest Missouri region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks or VHSO) through the period ending April 9, 2017. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the VHSO;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the VHSO;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the VHSO;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the VHSO to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the VHSO; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA and submitting other concerns identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders and VA Medical Center administrators worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA Medical Center regarding the quality of customer service.

Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the Southwest Missouri region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 9, 2017. In the Southwest Missouri region, one hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys collected from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their

customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, not including any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all survey responses were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations. Specific comments were selected to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement offered or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

Limitations

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys or from veterans' service organization representatives. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 9, 2017. During this period, one hundred fifty-three (153) survey responses were received in the Southwest Missouri region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty-four percent (64.1%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	2.0%
Korean War	3.3%
Vietnam War	64.1%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	17.0%
Iraq/Afghanistan	15.7%
Other	13.7%

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their gender. One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	91.5%
Female	8.5%

In the survey, over fifty-seven percent (57.5%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the Mount Vernon Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Fayetteville VA Medical Center	24.8%
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Branson Clinic	21.6%
Mount Vernon Clinic	57.5%
Fort Smith, AR Clinic	0.0%
Harrison, AR Clinic	0.0%
Ozark, AR Clinic	0.0%
Jay, OK Clinic	0.7%
Springfield Vet Center	2.6%
Other	3.9%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Fayetteville VA Medical Center. One hundred fifty-three (153) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	35.9%	Emergency Room	2.0%	Extended Care	0.7%
Outpatient Clinic	24.8%	Mental Health Services	11.1%	Dental	3.9%
Pharmacy	15.0%	X-Ray	9.2%	Laboratory	32.7%
Travel/Enrollment	3.9%	Main Lobby	9.2%	Specialist Visit	10.5%
Inpatient Care	3.3%	Women's Clinic	0.7%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.0%
Prosthetics	0.7%	Podiatry	0.0%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	1.3%
Claim & Pension Exam	7.8%	Other	27.5% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, etc.)		

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R2) are marked “current,” and results from the previous survey (R1) are also included.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at a VA facility has increased slightly for this round of surveys; however, concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	59.5%	63.3%
Mostly Agree:	20.9%	16.3%
Neutral:	11.8%	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	3.3%	9.0%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 123 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities at VHSO. Some veterans who indicated having trouble were displeased that they could not give input regarding when the appointment would be scheduled. A few veterans noted that they were concerned with the amount of time that it took to see their doctor or receive their medications from the time they contacted the VA.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I always had to agree to the dates that was available. Not what I wanted.”*
- *“We schedule at the time of our visit and are 80% of the time cancelled and rescheduled, often within a week of our appointment.”*
- *“Wait time was almost six weeks.”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire qualified, new staff and fill vacancies, especially in specialty areas and at the outpatient clinics, in order to reduce scheduling delays and changes. Review whether current scheduling practices accommodate walk-in visits efficiently, or could allow for more flexibility for veterans to choose their appointment dates and times.

VA Medical Center's Response:

At Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks, we remain firm in our commitment to ensuring timely access to care for all Veterans. We are using the Choice program where possible to ensure Veterans receive their appointments in less than 30 days. We have increased the numbers of Provider Agreements with local providers, which will allow us to work directly with providers to coordinate appointments in the community. We review our vacancies regularly to fill any critical position that would have a negative impact on access. Regarding the phone lines, we have implemented the Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system in each of our clinics, and we monitor the times daily to ensure they meet certain metrics. We know from time to time issues come up with the phones, and we make every effort to work quickly to resolve those issues. We will continue to review these data daily to make any corrections or changes necessary to ensure phones do not present a barrier to any patient who needs to reach our clinics.

2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

An overwhelming majority of veterans reported that they were able to easily navigate the VA medical facilities in the Southwest Missouri region in order to find the location of their appointments.

I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	78.4%	80.7%
Mostly Agree:	15.7%	6.0%
Neutral:	5.2%	7.2%
Mostly Disagree:	0.7%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	0.0%	4.2%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 144 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. Many veterans indicated that the signage and maps were clear and appropriate. Several also commented on how helpful the on-site volunteers are. Additionally, it was noted that check-in kiosks might not be user-friendly for older veterans.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"The volunteer help is very friendly and knowledgeable."*
- *"Seriously, there are enough signs pointing to clinics and volunteers at front desk to help."*

- *“Check-in kiosks are confusing for older veterans and seem to be a way for receptionists to push veterans off onto something else. It’s a generational issue, but very relevant considering the majority of veterans are older and not computer literate. It’s easy to waste time at the wrong kiosk before realizing you needed to check in somewhere else. Don’t even get me started on how confusing the medication kiosks are.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to keep updated signage available throughout the facilities, and ensure that all veterans are aware of any detours due to any campus construction. Review whether check-in and medication kiosks could be improved or simplified in order to enhance user-experience.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO is aware of the need to ensure all customers can obtain assistance when needed to access our services. We have made changes to the kiosks at times, and rely on them to speed up the check in process for all Veterans so that they can get to their appointment sooner. The staff at Mt. Vernon clinic are in the process of a System Re-design project to further improve the wayfinding at that clinic. Further, as we prepare for activation of the Springfield Clinic, signage is the utmost priority, and the contractor is already working on all of the wayfinding signage along with the Facility Planner to ensure it is easy to navigate for all who access the clinic. We will continue to train our staff on customer service standards and the expectation to ensure all who access our clinics are treated well and are given any assistance they need.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported slightly greater satisfaction with the cleanliness of the VA facilities during this survey period.

At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	78.4%	75.9%
Mostly Agree:	13.7%	15.1%
Neutral:	5.2%	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	1.3%	0.6%
Strongly Disagree:	1.3%	1.8%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 141 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region were clean. Only four responses indicated strong or overwhelming disagreement with the statement.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have always felt that even though the buildings are old, they are well kept and clean.”*
- *“Custodial care of facilities was excellent, clean and neat!”*
- *“Cockroaches, dead bugs, dirty floors. Appears to have Zero Maintenance people working there. Toilets always flooding or so dirty no one would want to use them.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff maintain their frequent monitoring of high-traffic areas and are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanness or obstructions to an area. Additionally, it is appropriate to recognize the good work the Environmental Management Service is doing based on the survey results from our veterans.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

A clean and well maintained facility is vital to ensure high quality care. Any issues that are brought to our attention will be addressed immediately. We have implemented a contract in our Branson Clinic for housekeeping, and we work closely with our building owners to address anything that arises that affects the cleanliness of our facilities. We are also proactive in this area by conducting environment of care rounds in every clinic to ensure the high standard of cleanliness is met.

4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

Satisfaction with wait times declined slightly since the last survey period. While most veterans report satisfaction with their appointment times, it is clear from their feedback that it still takes more than 30 days to schedule an appointment in many cases.

From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	55.6%	60.8%
Mostly Agree:	20.3%	17.5%
Neutral:	14.4%	10.8%
Mostly Disagree:	5.2%	2.4%
Strongly Disagree:	4.6%	8.4%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 116 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Most VA appointments are 30 days out or more. This is unreasonable. Civilian doctors see many more people in less time with half the staff.”*
- *“3-5 months seems ok I guess, but when they finish the new clinic in Springfield, it should be better. But knowing the VA they'll try to flood the system and it'll be the 3-5+ month wait all over again.”*
- *“The available appointment times are either last minute or more than a month out. While the patient care I have received is exceptional, the patient load is very heavy on the providers.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients' scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from time of initial contact.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VHSO does review wait times on a continual basis to ensure that Veterans are not waiting for their appointments. We offer the Choice Program and have increased our numbers of Provider Agreements to coordinate care in the community if we cannot provide the care within 30 days or when that specific care is needed. Our Resources Committee has been re-designed and is reviewing all vacancies so that there are no critical positions left vacant.

5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While some veterans are still having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the data shows that a large majority are pleased with the VA's clinical communication.

VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	65.4%	72.9%
Mostly Agree:	18.3%	12.7%
Neutral:	5.2%	7.2%

Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	6.5%	5.4%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 128 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the VHSD region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Provider is a female nurse practitioner and acts like her hands are tied from giving me Referrals to Specialty Care or the Veterans Choice Card. I have multiple medical conditions that I need specialty care for. But, this clinic and these providers are violating my rights to care and surgery.”*
- *“The VA staff have always been very informative and helpful, though it seems that specialists are more invested than the primary care physicians.”*
- *“I went to the VA to have bloodwork done. Throughout the whole process, the nurse only said one sentence to me. The level of customer service was disappointing.”*

Recommendation: Continue to improve communication best practices between medical staff and patients; urging staff to listen to patient concerns and provide complete answers to their questions regarding care.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

If there is any situation where a patient cannot be seen in 30 days, they qualify to be seen via the Choice Program. We encourage anyone who is being told otherwise to contact Patient Advocate’s to have their situation reviewed immediately. When necessary, we have also used extended hours to ensure Veterans are seen. We remain very committed to timely access, and even offer same day access at all locations. We expect every employee to demonstrate the ICARE Values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence) during every interaction. Veterans with these or other concerns are encouraged to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. Accordingly, the data suggests that a strong majority of veterans were pleased with the VA’s healthcare efficiency.

I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	60.1%	66.9%
Mostly Agree:	22.2%	9.0%
Neutral:	2.0%	9.0%
Mostly Disagree:	5.9%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	9.8%	10.2%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 126 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Many concerns expressed by veterans related to specialty care access in a timely or convenient fashion.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Care has always been exceptional.”*
- *“My primary care team is in Mount Vernon. Almost any specialty care I need, I have to go to Fayetteville or wait to be seen by a civilian in Springfield. Also, the trip from Bolivar to Mount Vernon is an hour long trip. I receive no travel reimbursement for this nearly 60 mile trip because my disability rating has been holding (for unknown reasons) since 2013. I'm making these trips for service connected injury treatment and can't get reimbursed for travel because my claim for service connection has been held up for 4 years.”*
- *“Needed to be scheduled with an orthopedic doctor after X-rays and things have been screwed up with that process. Still trying to get it resolved.”*

Recommendation: Increase efforts to fill vacancies for specialists to improve timely patient access to necessary services. Provide further guidance to clinical staff regarding appropriate use of appointment time and communication with patients. Provide descriptions of appointment structure to veterans ahead of the appointment so they will have informed expectations.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, we continue to remain committed to providing access to all Veterans. If there is any situation where a patient cannot be seen within 30 days, we refer them to the Choice Program so they can be seen in their local community. We have also utilized Saturday clinics and extended hours to reduce wait times for Veterans. All schedulers are currently participating in mandatory training to ensure they are educated on scheduling practices that are consistent with VA guidelines. We are happy to work individually with a Veteran if he or she has a concern about

their visit or appointment scheduling. Veterans with these or other concerns are encouraged to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown at VHSO is one of this region's high scores. More than 88 percent of responses indicated strong satisfaction with the VHSO's culture of respect.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	74.5%	75.3%
Mostly Agree:	13.7%	11.4%
Neutral:	2.0%	5.4%
Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	9.8%	6.0%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 135 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. The data suggests that recent VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training may be working as intended. However, veterans continued to report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I saw different Vets dismissed and ignored. Did see one nurse be very nice and at least pretend she cared."*
- *"Staff is ok, doctor not so much. He lacks compassion."*
- *"I have always been treated with the utmost respect and feel that everyone at this facility is genuinely concerned about my health and welfare."*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to educate all VA staff on the importance placed in *"I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics."* Those employees who best display *I CARE* values deserve to be properly recognized, and those employees identified as lacking should receive additional guidance. Additionally, investigate and provide opportunities for sensitivity training for staff.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VHSO is committed to the highest level of customer service, and continue to incorporate the Customer Service Training in New Employee Orientation. We have also been conducting the VA 101 training, which incorporates more information on the ICARE values. It is the expectation of this facility that all employees demonstrate these in every interaction with all patients, and we pride ourselves on providing outstanding customer service.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

A strong majority of responses indicated a willingness to positively recommend VHSO facilities to other veterans. Over 80 percent indicated they would recommend the VA to other veterans. The data suggests that veterans are slightly more inclined to positively recommend VHSO facilities to other veterans than the previous survey period. Since the last Summary Report, willingness to recommend VHSO facilities has grown from 79.5% (R1) to 81.0% (R2).

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	67.3%	70.5%
Mostly Agree:	13.7%	9.0%
Neutral:	7.2%	6.0%
Mostly Disagree:	3.9%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	7.8%	9.6%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this statement with 124 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *"I have been going to this facility for 2 1/2 years and have great care."*
- *"They've always treated me very well and with respect and professionalism."*
- *"I see other complaints nationwide and feel very fortunate to not have the same issues arise with my healthcare."*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *"They seem not to care. Get you in, get you out."*

- *“The care for the most part is good, but the constant rescheduling is very stressful for our family.”*
- *“It seems to me and other veterans that a lot of the staff has become more rude and that some of the medical doctors don't want to do anything.”*

Recommendation: Continue to provide resources to Patient Advocates and Voluntary Services so veterans feel they have a place to voice their concerns and feel confident that those concerns will be addressed.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The Veteran Voices Advisory Council is ongoing and meets regularly to discuss patient concerns. This group is made up of Veterans, their family members, and a VHSO staff liaison. This is a vital part of our governance structure, and the council is able to submit concerns, suggestions, and feedback directly to the Executive Leadership Board. The Patient Advocate positions are both filled and we review their data daily during our morning meeting to look for any trends or concerns that need to be addressed. While most of our Veterans report they are highly satisfied, it is important to us that every Veteran is highly satisfied. As stated in a prior response, we train every new employee on customer service, and are actively training staff in the VA 101 courses to affirm the commitment to the ICARE values. We strongly encourage Veterans with any concerns to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

A veteran’s confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. Since the first report, veterans’ satisfaction with their physician or nurse has remained at just over 80 percent (80.4%). The data suggests that medical staff is working hard to maintain high quality veterans’ health care experiences.

How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	65.4%	65.7%
Above Average:	15.0%	15.1%
Average/Fair:	8.5%	9.0%
Below Average:	3.9%	4.2%
Poor:	7.2%	6.0%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this question with 123 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and high quality care. Many veteran respondents had gone through several doctor or team changes, sometimes to their dissatisfaction.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I’ve had 7 doctors in 7 years.”*
- *“Nursing staff is great and consistent. However, nearly every time I go to see my primary care physician, I have a different doctor. It’s like a revolving door for doctors.”*
- *“The best I have been around. Comparable to the doctors I had in Joplin, very good.”*

Recommendation: Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans. Take actions to minimize high turn-over rates.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The monthly Employee Town Hall and Awards Ceremony is a regular mechanism that we use to recognize employees for their hard work and dedication to our mission. Years of service awards, great catch awards, Employee of the Month, patient compliments, and other means of recognition are made during this venue. The Medical Center Director travels to the CBOCs in our catchment area to conduct Employee Town Hall and Awards Ceremonies there as well – making sure that staff in the CBOCs are recognized.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

The VA Medical Center’s continued focus on respect and communication through the “I CARE” Program appears to be slightly improving veterans’ overall experiences.

How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	48.4%	51.2%
Above Average:	25.5%	22.3%
Average/Fair:	11.1%	14.5%
Below Average:	10.5%	3.6%
Poor:	4.6%	8.4%

One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this question with 113 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was “Excellent” or “Above Average.” Twenty-three (23) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility was either “Below Average” or “Poor.”

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have had 7 appointments at this facility; all have been an exceptional experience. Branson VA is THE best of the best.”*
- *“Overall, in the limited experience I have had, the care has improved over the years but needs to be better.”*
- *“Once again, compared to nationwide news stories, my experience has been better than others.”*

Recommendation: Continue to build on improvements with patient experience by implementing recommendations found in the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP). Ensure that stakeholder feedback and veterans’ concerns are at the forefront of all efforts by the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, it is important to us to hear any concern or suggestion from our Veterans and stakeholders. We have a variety of mechanisms to receive feedback, such as through our Patient Advocate Office, Community Town Halls, Monthly One-On-One with the Director meetings, Veterans Voices Advisory Councils, meetings with Veteran Service Officers, coalition groups, and other means. We have been able to act on many issues due to the feedback we have received, and we will continue to strive to ensure all concerns are heard and acted upon where possible.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Summary Report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"It was very crowded."*
- *"Getting scheduled appointments sooner."*
- *"Better able to retain doctors."*
- *"A more modern facility would be nice, one in which rooms/departments are more centrally located and easier to find."*
- *"More doctors might reduce wait time."*
- *"(Appointment) automatically made; and if you don't take it, your waiting time will have 3-5 months added on to a 3 month or longer wait..."*
- *"Too many things require me to go to Fayetteville for services instead of having them at an outpatient clinic, such as podiatrist, physical therapist, etc."*
- *"Allow a Veteran a Choice in care and the ability to use local doctors as needed."*
- *"To call me about my diagnosis, remind me to make yearly exams and also they are very non-helpful to my wife who is considered my caregiver. Sometimes when she has tried to call them, or go into office, she leaves in tears with no answers or suggestions."*
- *"More complete care - include insulin pump therapy."*
- *"Billing should be done from the facility you visit. It takes too long for them to communicate with each other. And the billings are difficult to decipher."*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Which provider or department that does an excellent job do you want Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in VHSO medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. One hundred fifty-three (153) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Southwest Missouri region.

Below are sample responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"Dr. T. of Team 6 for the most thorough physical examination I have ever had. Nurse K., she is also part of Team 6 and is the kindest, most caring and compassionate nurse I have ever known. Nurse K. is an amazing asset to the Branson VA Clinic. Please tell Team 6 they rock."*
- *"The Women's Clinic in Mt. Vernon is top-notch! I really like the eye clinic, as well. I have received excellent service from the pharmacy. My Primary Care Team, Team 4 takes good care of me. The laboratory is efficient and friendly. The front desk is helpful and friendly."*
- *"Dr. T. W. in Audiology rates a gold star in my opinion, also Dr. M. W. I have nothing but praise for everyone I have ever dealt with at Mt. Vernon VA."*
- *"My team #13 has been a real pleasure to deal with and have been super-efficient. In fact they are exponentially more efficient than my healthcare provider in my insurance system. Just cannot say enough good things for the nurses, blood takers and doctors do a very thorough exam."*
- *"D. the ostomy nurse at Fayetteville is one of the nicest and helpful people you would ever want to work with. She has been working and helping me for almost 15 years now and have never had a problem at all."*
- *"Dr. K. is the most dedicated doctor I have ever met. She has called on weekends to check on me, and once because she wanted me to stop a medicine because of a reported problem. It was two weeks later before the prescribing physician's office called to do the same. Outstanding performance on her part!"*

- *“Dr. E's Team 8 is always courteous, helpful and thorough.”*
- *“The vision clinic at the Branson, MO facility.”*
- *“Primary care team #16, Dr. E., Laboratory and Dr. T., Pharmacy.”*

Recommendation: Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks deserves high praise for the many dedicated and compassionate professionals who care for our nation's veterans. Continue to ensure that those employees who provide superior care and customer service are properly recognized and rewarded.

VA Medical Center's Response:

We hold our employees in the highest regard, and it is the philosophy of VHSC that to have happy customers, we must have happy employees. We strive to recognize our staff for the dedication and hard work they provide daily to help us meet our mission to take care of Veterans. The Director has implemented a monthly Town Hall and Awards Ceremony that allows for public recognition of staff for many things including: Great Catch Awards, Years of Service, Special Contributions, New Employees, Retirements, and any special recognition that is warranted. Further, a monthly one-on-one with the Director has been established that allows staff or Veterans to have time with the Director to share ideas, concerns, etc. Quarterly (minimum) the Director and other members of the leadership team travel to each CBOC to hear from employees, provide updated information, and to recognize special contributions. We know that without our stellar men and women on the front lines, we could not do our job and live the ICARE values.



FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks (VHSO) is committed to ensuring that Veterans receive timely access to care. To achieve that commitment, we use a combination of in house services, traditional Non-VA Care, and the Veteran Choice Program. Using all avenues available allows appointments to be scheduled in the most efficient manner possible. Walk-in visits are available, and we have utilized Saturday clinics as well to increase access. The VISTA Scheduling Enhancements are rolling out nationally in late FY16 – and it is anticipated that the software enhancement will greatly ease scheduling barriers,"* in response to veterans' concerns about personnel shortages as it related to apparent delays in scheduling appointments. What is the current status on the number of vacancies at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks, and what steps are being taken to improve the recruiting and hiring process?

VA Medical Center's Response:

As mentioned in previous responses, our Resources Committee has been re-designed to have a more efficient approach for assessing and filling critical vacancies. The number of vacancies is very fluid, as we bring on new staff regularly, and have staff that resign or retire all throughout the year. Each member of the leadership team meets with their Service Chiefs on a monthly basis to review every vacancy by service. Those that are determined to be the most critical need are forwarded to the Resources Committee. We have also approved PRN nursing staff to ensure any gaps in nursing coverage are immediately addressed. Beyond that, we adhere to VA national regulations regarding the hiring process.

Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"VHSO has taken the initiative in several ways to enhance communication with our Veteran patients. For example, VHSO is a pilot site for the text messaging program currently under development in the VA. We look forward to participating in this pilot to increase the mechanisms by which information is sent to patients with regard to appointments and other reminders. Another program that has been implemented is embedding staff from Tri West at our Fayetteville campus.*

While the staff are currently in training, it is anticipated that this will provide a direct link to TriWest so that Veterans can have their questions answered and receive their appointments in a more timely manner. With regard to secure messaging, we have a robust tracking system in place, and the coordinator will escalate any message that has not been reviewed after 24 hours,” in regard to recommendations made to improve communication by the VA staff with the veteran. What is the current status of the new program implemented with TriWest?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

This program has far exceeded our expectations – and we are very pleased with the outcome. We have had very positive comments from Veterans about things going much more smoothly with Choice appointments. The embedded staff are able to more quickly be involved and alleviate any concerns or barriers to Veterans being appointed in the community.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the first Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, “All new employees are required to take Customer Service Training. We also educate staff on the VA I CARE Values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Engagement). The newly appointed Medical Center Director has placed an increased emphasis on treating all stakeholders (patients, visitors, employees, and community partners) with respect in all interactions. VHSO will continue to educate staff through various forums including: Town Halls, In-Service Trainings, and other educational programs.” What feedback have you collected from these engagement efforts, and evaluate how effective these efforts have been with regard to maintaining the veteran at the center of all decision- making within the VA?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We continue to engage in all efforts named, and are working with the Veteran Experience Office to implement the Own the Moment Program, an initiative designed to further ensure staff are providing the highest level of customer service. As mentioned in prior responses, we have trained more than 50% of our staff in VA 101, and have monthly VA Voices training sessions. Our patient satisfaction ratings remain very high.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the first Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, “Since the results of this survey were sent, the Patient Advocates have been realigned into Voluntary Services. Data from Patient Advocates is also reviewed by the leadership daily. The results of our satisfaction surveys indicate most Veterans are very highly satisfied, but it is important to us that all Veterans and their families are satisfied. We have implemented a Veterans Voice Advisory Council that reports through our governance structure to the leadership. This is made up of Veterans and their families, and they report concerns or suggestions via monthly meeting minutes to the leadership team, which includes the Medical Center Director, Associate

Medical Center Director, Chief of Staff, and Associate Director for Patient Care Services. Through this mechanism, we have been able to implement suggestion boxes and other ideas presented as well as address various concerns. A Veteran is also a member of the Executive Leadership Board, the highest level of the governance structure. This gives another avenue of input to the leadership from Veterans so that changes can be made as necessary to ensure continued satisfaction.” What is the current status of the surveys and Veterans Voice Advisory Council, and how has the feedback gained from these initiatives been used to improve the quality of care and experience veterans receive at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Our satisfaction surveys continue to show very high levels of patient satisfaction, and we are pleased with the results of this report as well. We always continue to strive to improve our ratings in all areas. The initiatives mentioned are still ongoing; and as a result of feedback from the Veteran Voice Advisory Council, we are implementing a Veteran transportation service, offering new classes through Patient Education, and incorporating music in some of our lobbies. We look forward to the continued relationship and ongoing partnership.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Southwest Missouri region is making progress with regard to customer service at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' customer service experiences at the Southwest Missouri region VA facilities. It is evident from the veterans' responses that the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks is doing a superior job serving veterans across every category, particularly in the areas of respect, wayfinding, and cleanliness. However, it is important that staff remain vigilant and responsive to veterans' concerns so that veterans continue to access the high quality care and customer service they rightly deserve.

I am pleased that the VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. One of the initiatives the VHSO has adopted to improve customer care is offering customer service training, as well as additional training regarding its ICARE values to new and current employees. Additionally, VHSO continually reviews its patient wait times. They have worked to increase the numbers of Provider Agreements with local providers to allow them to coordinate appointments in the community if the veteran could not receive an appointment through the VA in less than 30 days. Overall, efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the VHSO are underway, and progress will continue toward increasingly positive results.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

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